

## Gas leak a disaster for Gunnison

Several Main Street businesses now are shuttered; cleanup costs may top \$1M

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GUNNISON - Lila Lee Christensen's fancy dress shop had for decades been the stuff of prom and wedding fantasy.

But this summer, after its basement showroom began to fill with gasoline vapors, the shop became ground zero for a community nightmare.

"Main Street is a disaster, a total disaster," said Christensen.

"And we're all trying not to get discouraged," added Lori Nay, a city councilwoman who operates the historic Casino Star Theater two doors down.

It's been tough, though, in the three months since local and county officials shut down a block of Main Street for a day because of an underground gas tank leak at the Top Stop gas station.

Since then, a cleanup contractor has dug out downtown sidewalks on both sides of the street to get at the leak and to vent the fumes.

But six businesses, including Christensen's 57-year-old dress shop and the Top Stop, have been shuttered. A local homeowner was evacuated Wednesday, when tests showed the fumes had seeped even farther, into a residential area.

Cleanup contractor Les Pennington said tracking the leak has been difficult.

The company's records suggest the tank lost 20,000 gallons. The 12,000-gallon tank, buried like a barrel on its side, sprung a leak along a corroded seam, a common place for underground tanks to fail.

The hole was a quarter-inch by 1 inch about one third of the way up from the tank's bottom, he said.

The gas, which contains cancer-causing chemicals, apparently hit a hard, heavily compacted layer of soil about 10 feet down, headed south down Main Street half a block, then crossed the street through an ancient, buried streambed and moved south to the dress shop and beyond.

It has spread faster and wider than expected, said Pennington, principal engineer for Wasatch Environmental, the cleanup contractor.

Cleanup engineers have installed special vapor-collection drains through Main Street and vents at the stripped-down Top Stop. Massive vacuums and special carbon filters have been installed.

While some locals are questioning the company's commitment to restore downtown, Pennington said everything that can be done is being done. And it may take a couple of years to finish the job.

"Believe me," he said, "I've spent many a night thinking about that, and I can assure you that we will do all we can do to fix it."

The state Division of Environmental Response and Remediation's underground petroleum tank office has been overseeing the work since the first calls came in Aug. 10. The office oversees a kind of insurance fund that covers \$990,000 of cleanup costs when an underground tank leaks, after participating companies pay a \$10,000 deductible.

"It's kind of rare to have a catastrophic leak like this anymore," said John Menatti, who manages the fund.

"That's why the fund is here: Because these things can add up, cost a lot."

Wind River Petroleum owns the Top Stop and hired the cleanup contractors to deal with the leak. Its half-owner, Keith Christensen, was a candidate for Salt Lake City mayor earlier this year.

Jim Larson, the company's vice president of marketing and operations, disputed rumors that the leak had been going on for months or longer. He called it an accident that the company discovered in August while making monthly inventory reports to the state.

"We're obviously sorry it has occurred," he said.

And, while Larson doubted the cost of the cleanup and damages will exceed the tank fund's \$1 million cap, others in town were doubtful.

Peter Stirba, Gunnison's city attorney, has approached Wind River to talk about the damage sustained by the city and its residents. The city also has hired its own engineers, said Stirba, "to assist in actions we'll ultimately have to take."

"How did this occur?" he asked. "Why did this occur? The city doesn't know, and certainly we intend to find out."

Nay said the leak has driven people out of downtown Gunnison, from the café, from her historic theater and just about every other Main Street business. All are suffering.

"They had to have known they were losing that kind of fuel," she said.

Lila Lee Christensen said she has been smelling the fumes for two years. Around Independence Day, it was awful, like sticking your face at the gas tank and breathing when you fill up your car, she said. "My eyes burned, my nose burned, my throat was sore."

And one day a customer asked to visit "Candyland," the basement rooms so stuffed with prom and party gowns that it feels like walking into a huge jar of jelly beans swathed in satin and lace.

From the racks, hundreds of gowns billow with crystals, pearls and sequins and lavishly colored like tangerines, limes, cherries, lemons and cotton candy.

A low spot on Main Street, it overwhelmed the customer, recalled Christensen.

"She came out of there like a gunshot, and said, 'I'm not staying down there. It smells like gas,'" she said.

"It wasn't healthy for my customers, so I turned them away."

She closed the store last month for good. Now she is taking inventory for which she will send the bill to Wind River. She also expects the company to buy the 2,000-gown-a-year business and the building itself.

"It's been tough, because I love this job," said Christensen, who was born in an upstairs room of the building.

"The main concern from the city is, how do we recover?" said Nay.

"We're talking about something that may do us in as a community, as a business district," she said. "It's a tragedy."

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## Storage tank fund

- \* **Created about 18 years ago**, the fund has paid out \$109 million in claims.
- \* **Drivers help pay for it** with a .5-cent surcharge on each gallon of gasoline.
- \* **Gas stations also pay a fee** of \$50 a year, or \$150 for stations that sell large volumes of gasoline.
- \* **The fund's cash balance** was approaching \$12 million last spring.

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